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THE ACADEMIC VIEW . . . By Prof. S. E. Luria

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## On viewing American Indian art exhibit

My wife and I recently visited the exhibition of 200 years of American Indian Art at the Whitney Museum in New York. No one can resist the appeal of these works, the mixture of religious feelings, high spirits, plastic sense and intense seriousness conveyed by the artifacts so lovingly displayed. Lovingly indeed, at the hands of sensitive people who evidently treasure that art and presumably admire the artisans who created it.

Yet, these objects are the output of American Indians in the last two hundred years, two centuries of spoliation and deceit and slaughter. There is, in fact, a deep mournfulness in this Indian art, so different from the religious, metaphysical gloom of Aztec carvings. This is the art of a doomed people. "Bury my heart at Wounded Knee," these artists must have been thinking as their hands fashioned a ceremonial mask or chiseled a wooden image.

A chilling thought comes to mind: will there be one day, in this museum or in some other sheltered cathedral of American culture, an exhibit of Indochinese art? The papers report again the frequent bombing of North Vietnam — American pilots bombing North Vietnam so that other American pilots can bomb Laos and Cambodia unimpeded by the insolent, insufferable meddling by the Vietnamese.

Does history repeat itself? American Indians, dispossessed of their land and driven to desperation, dared to attack a convoy or a fort of the white invader. Vietnamese, dispossessed of their own sky, dare to attack our bombers with missiles. Then as now, retribution was promptly visited upon the miscreants, whether by cannon or by bomber plane.

There is in the Whitney exhibition a reminder that even "Vietnamization" — the mutual slaughter of Indochinese programmed by American computers — is not quite a new invention. One of the most attractive and disturbing exhibits in a small painted tapestry portraying a series of encounters between rifle-armed Indian warriors shooting each other with an almost catatonic abandon. Not one white man is involved in the shooting: the only one present is a soldier, driving what seems to be a military horse and carriage — or is it a bomber?

Is there so much continuity in our history? The red man had to go: he had the land the white man wanted. Judeo-Christian morality could be adapted to the occasion: "But, o Lord, he is not my neighbor," although he carves and paints and fights well.

The black man had to come and toil: he had the strength the white man needed. "But, o Lord, he is not quite human," even if he enriches

the soul and the sound of our culture.

The yellow man now must be bombed to save him from communism: he has the military bases we want. "But, o Lord, it is by accident that he suffers," at My Lai, from the sea, from the sky. And we, the white men, will help with hospitals, with relief, with our easygoing graft, our surplus goods and later perhaps with art exhibits. If it will not be too late, even for us.

Our righteous ethics can always bend itself into a variety of convenient props for action or for inaction. How can it preserve us from evil doing? The same religion that made the Pilgrims saintly against worldly corruption made them murderers of witches and Quakers. And a Quaker upbringing can produce a witness for peace or a perpetrator of war crimes.

The Whitney exhibit also has a group of delightful Eskimo works, not only high spirited but intensely cheerful. They are the art of a people that has not been hurt by human power nor has used power against man, only against the hostile but fair forces of nature.

This art seems to hold a lesson. Maybe the lesson is simply that power should be of man and not over man or against man. When man's power is perverted and turned against man joy and hope go out of life.

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